Burkina Faso: Managing Conflict at the Village Handpump and Beyond

Many conflicts in Burkina Faso centre around the village handpump or well. (Photo: N. MacMillan)

2001-06-29

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Young men in Silmiougou, a village in central Burkina Faso, would like a fair chance at finding wives in nearby villages. But they have a big handicap that is unrelated to their own suitability as husbands: their village has only one handpump for 3,000 people. This fact makes women from outside Silmiougou dread the idea of marrying a man from there. They know their lives would be filled with the daily drudgery of spending hours fetching enough water to meet their family's needs. So Silmiougou men end up marrying from within the village or leaving altogether.

About 10 kilometres away, the village of Goué has four handpumps — although two don't work — for a population of 2,800. According to the government's recommended ratio of one pump per 300 people, there should be nine handpumps in Goué. But the water supply situation is still much better than in Silmiougou. Nonetheless, many conflicts centre around those handpumps.

Hostile lineups

"When we get to the pump, there is shoving to get water," says Appoline Nana, secretary of the village women's association. "There aren't enough pumps. You can arrive at 5 [a.m.] and still be there at noon without having filled a 20-litre container. We line up, but then other women arrive who are in a hurry. Some of them fight because of that."

These and other conflicts over water resources are typical of villages in the Nakanbé (formerly the White Volta) River watershed, which runs north-south through the centre of the country — a zone of 1.5 million people, which includes the capital Ouagadougou. Central Burkina Faso already suffers from poor rainfall, a lack of money for water supply equipment, and an uneven geographic distribution of water supply facilities. In response, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is supporting a project in the watershed that aims to improve the management of local water resource conflicts.

Project leader

The project is led by Nlombi Kibi, a Canadian researcher originally from Kinshasa. Dr Kibi, an expert on water and energy management systems, is on secondment from l'Industrielle de l'Environnement (IE), a branch of the Université de Québec's Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS-Eau). He is working with the Centre d'études, de documentation et de recherche en économie sociale (CEDRES) at the University of Ouagadougou, which provides scientific supervision, administrative and technical support, and community animation professionals.

What sets this project apart is a participatory approach in which the project team involves local community members from the start, says Dr Kibi. The objective is not to implement strictly technical solutions to overcome water supply problems, but to develop management mechanisms that promote the fair and equitable distribution of water resources among all the different users.

Stakeholders

Beginning in 1999, the project team first identified small and medium-level water users, or stakeholders, from 19 villages in three different sub-zones of the Nakanbé watershed. The stakeholders ranged from ordinary women, girls, and adolescent females to market gardeners, livestock raisers, brewers of 'dolo' (a beer made from millet), merchants, brickmakers, millers, and builders. A local administrative layer of stakeholders includes prefects, village chiefs, clan chiefs, and land chiefs. "These are the people in direct contact with water," says Dr Kibi.

The team also identified large water users such as the national water and sanitation company, the national hydroelectricity company, and local industries. Other stakeholders are market gardening groups, cattle herders, fishers, and the city of Kongoussi, which draws its drinking water from Lake Bam. Finally, there are stakeholders with power or influence over water issues such as the Ministry of the Environment and Water, large donor programs, an inter-state training school on water resources rural engineering, government research institutions, and administrative and political representatives.

Identifying conflicts

At this point, field researchers and animators surveyed village-level stakeholders and a sample of households to identify the main conflicts and problems related to water resources. There were three main categories: social, technical, and health. Many social conflicts involve people jumping to the front of lineups at handpumps. These conflicts become visible when clay water jugs are smashed or women get into shoving matches. At other times, the conflict remains invisible, but is felt nonetheless, says Karidia Sanon, an economist on the project team. She cites the case of a village chief's wife who went to the head of the line while the other women — although resentful — said nothing.

Conflict along ethnic lines was often expressed. At a village near Lake Bam, members of one ethnic group caused friction with two other ethnic groups when they arrived at the watering station with their livestock. Cultural traditions were also at the root of some water supply problems. For instance, where certain wells are considered sacred, the water can be restricted to such uses as preparing traditional medicines. Such restrictions mean that potable water is not available for other uses, placing additional strain on the remaining sources.

Inadequate oversight

Conflicts over health and hygiene often reflect the failure of local water management committees to properly oversee the maintenance and operations of watering stations. The results are visible when livestock drink beside a handpump or well because no walls have been built to keep animals out. These animals can contaminate the water supply and pass on illnesses to humans.

In September 2000, the different types of conflicts were discussed at a two-day roundtable exercise, which for the first time brought together community-level stakeholders and stakeholders from government, private sector, and academic circles. Here, the participatory process was reinforced by exploring the viewpoints, concerns, and reasoning of stakeholders. About six weeks later, the project team worked with the roundtable delegates from the 19 villages to report back to their communities on proposed solutions. The communities were each asked to select three solutions for implementation.

Progress

At this stage, the project team found that significant progress had already been made on water issues. The search for solutions launched by project activities seems to have been a sufficient stimulus for communities to begin taking action themselves. For example, people in some communities were planning to introduce water fees to raise money for a handpump; manually construct wells, handpumps, and other infrastructure; participate in awareness campaigns on water use and water-borne illnesses; and support management committees. Moreover, roundtable discussions on the need for quicker government action on water installations may have helped turn the wheels of bureaucracy. In several locales, villagers started seeing movement on geophysical studies and longstanding requests to install wells and handpumps.

The project is now taking advantage of this momentum to implement at least one of the activities proposed by stakeholders. These include fixing some broken pumps and wells, creating watering holes for livestock to relieve congestion at handpumps, and reorganizing or establishing committees to manage water stations.

Conflict resolution

Dr Kibi says that some conflicts — such as not taking one's turn in line — may be addressed through participatory communication efforts involving both villagers and other stakeholders in government or allied circles, who can help to resolve certain problems. He notes that better management of conflict will not solve all problems — some situations call for more water supply points. Referring to places like Silmiougou, he says: "The problems are very serious. Imagine a village of 3,000 people with just one handpump!"

With further support from IDRC's People, Land, and Water (PLaW) program initiative, and additional funding from the Canadian International Development Agency's Programme de communication sociale, the project is now entering a second phase, in which participatory communication techniques and model villages will be used to apply the knowledge and experience gained so far to improve water management in many villages throughout Burkina Faso.

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For more information:

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